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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS OF TUNISIA (TRY TO) UNITE

REF: 06 TUNIS 2844

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) The unrecognized Tunisian Journalists Syndicate (SJT, reftel) claims that its efforts to join the umbrella General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) are being blocked by the GOT. In addition to discouraging the UGTT from working with the SJT, the GOT is purported to have manufactured the unionization of the more pro-government Tunisian Journalists Association (AJT) as part of a campaign to stymie the SJT. The standoff between the two unions leaves Tunisian journalists without an effective legal advocate, and hampers local efforts to foster credible critical reporting on domestic issues and freedom of expression. End summary.

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No Safety in Numbers  
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¶2. (C) The small Tunisian Journalists Syndicate (SJT) says that it has long suffered from GOT pressure, most recently efforts to stymie its unionization effort. SJT President Lotfi Hajji told PolOff that Tunisian labor law requires a declaration of intent to unionize be filed with the regional governor in order for a union to be recognized. Hajji says the SJT did so in May 2004, but the governor refused to accept the Declaration, a circumstance which the law does not address. (Note: Such bureaucratic end runs are typical of GOT efforts to stymie many civil liberties which, on the books, are protected by law. End note.) As a result, Hajji considers the SJT legal, while the government has refused to recognize the union and argues it should register as an association (for which a different procedure applies). Hajji estimates that there are roughly five hundred practicing journalists in Tunisia not including support staff. According to Hajji, the Tunisian Journalists Association or AJT (a government-sanctioned association but not a union) has 800 to 900 registered members only because they issue press credentials to support staff and others only tangentially connected to the media. He said that at its start, the SJT had about 150 members, but as a result of GOT pressure not all SJT members are active.

¶3. (C) Hajji had been in talks to merge the SJT with the registered Tunisian labor confederation the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT, reftel). (Note: The UGTT often walks a fine line between cooperating with the GOT and responding to the demands of the rank and file. Such a merger would have offered legitimacy to the SJT, perhaps at the cost of

some of its independence. End note.) Unfortunately, according to Hajji, the UGTT suddenly began to throw up roadblocks. First the UGTT refused to register journalists that worked for foreign media outlets. This would have excluded many independent journalists (including Hajji himself) who are correspondents for foreign media outlets because they are unable to find work domestically. Hajji reckoned the rule would render about a quarter of the SJT's journalists ineligible to join the UGTT. Increasing difficulties led to the indefinite postponement of the SJT congress planned for October (which would have paved the way for the SJT to join the UGTT). Faced with the loss of the use of the UGTT-provided public space, the SJT is exploring alternate means of holding its congress, such as on-line or by absentee ballot.

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UNLESS YOU HAVE THE RIGHT FRIENDS  
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14. (C) Just 48 hours after the cancellation of the SJT Congress, the AJT came forward and began discussions to join the UGTT as a union. Unlike the SJT, the AJT had no difficulties holding its congress, which it used to modify its constitution allowing it to become a union. The AJT presented its request to unionize to Governor of Tunis Mondher Friji on November 15, and the governor accepted the request. Post-unionization, the AJT will be known as the National Union for Tunisian Journalists or SNJT. Hajji views the SNJT/AJT's unionization as a significant blow to the SJT. He fears it will jeopardize the SJT's standing with international organizations and facilitate GOT attempts to marginalize the SJT domestically. The SJT president speculated that the SNJT/AJT's unionization is being fast-tracked because it is an organization close to the ruling party, whereas the SJT is independent. (Note: The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) suspended the membership of the AJT on March 7, 2004 over complaints that the AJT failed to adequately defend the rights of Tunisian journalists. In June 2007 the AJT was reinstated. The SJ is also a member of the IFJ. End Note.) Hajjiopined that even SNJT/AJT discussions with the UGTT would be grounds to refuse the SJT's request to merge with the umbrella organization. Despite this, Hajji said the SJT would attempt to resolve its difficulties with the UGTT, but ultimately would revert to its status as an independent union if negotiations were not productive.

15. (C) While the SNJT had no trouble getting authorized, it appears organization is proving more difficult. Plans to hold a congress to elect new leadership, originally planned for December, have been postponed until 2008. SNJT President Raouf Bouzaïene refused to meet with EmbOffs until the Congress is convened, which suggests the group may not have a unified position on key issues related to the journalism profession. At the same time, some AJT members are seeking to block the association's transformation into a professional union. One member told PolOff a group of journalists is protesting the dissolution of the AJT and seek to retain its original purpose of defending freedom of expression and press liberty.

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Comment  
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16. (C) Despite international calls for increased freedom of expression, journalism remains a difficult endeavor in Tunisia, not suitable for the faint of heart or easily discouraged. The SJT/SNJT situation leaves Tunisian journalists without a useful legal advocate. The independence of the SNJT is questionable, while the unrecognized SJT lacks the legal standing it needs to effectively defend journalists. Though they report frequent harassment, the international attention commanded by notable journalists provides them with some measure of protection. Without a union, however, the average reporter is left to bear the full brunt of GOT pressure. The role the

international community can play is limited, and ultimately the ability of domestic journalism to evolve hinges on the creation of an independent legal union, which does not seem likely in the near future. End comment.

GODEC